



Growth calls for changes in commuter lifestyle

BOOM PLAN: A regional agency offers cities help in preparing for more people and traffic.

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By BRADLEY WEAVER / The Press-Enterprise

Government officials must take action to cope with an expected tidal wave of new residents, choking smog and gridlocked roads in a region already pressured by runaway development.

That was the warning Tuesday from the Southern California Association of Governments, which revealed its long-term plan designed to help city leaders and transportation planners brace for a population boom of 6.3 million people over the next 25 years.

"It's apparent that Southern California isn't adequately prepared to deal with the growth that's going to occur," San Bernardino Councilwoman Susan Lien Longville, a SCAG member, said Tuesday.

The plan, which looks at growth in Los Angeles, Ventura, Orange, Imperial, San Bernardino and Riverside counties, calls for significant changes to Southern California's commuter lifestyle.

Sprawl would be reduced by placing new development near existing urban areas, clustering jobs and communities together so fewer residents will be forced to travel long distances to work.

Residents would be encouraged to use trains and buses to avoid the increasingly crowded freeways.

Nearly half of all new Inland homes being built by 2030 would be apartments, townhomes and condominiums.

Hoping to build political support for the plan, SCAG officials plan to spend the next six years taking their blueprint to various cities and counties.

"It's going to be a case-by-case process," said SCAG spokesman Jeff Lustgarten. "Each city will have to decide whether they want to change their general plans. We don't expect it to be adopted wholesale and we realize that it'll take time."

The plan appeals to Raul Lopez, who spends nearly three hours in his car each day traveling from his Moreno Valley home to his job in Irvine.

"We're getting spread further and further away from our jobs that we spend more time in our cars than with our families," Lopez said. "But this is only a plan. I'm not holding my breath that anything will change for me."

One of those cluster areas could be the newly restored Santa Fe Depot train station in San Bernardino. Another could be the city of Perris, where residents will soon board an extended leg of the Metrolink commuter train.

Planners on Tuesday said Riverside County already is preparing for growth by protecting open space and balancing freeway and housing needs through the Riverside County Integrated Plan and the Multi Species Habitat and Conservation Plan.

But SCAG officials said their plan covers most of Southern California, reflecting the "smart growth" concept that emphasizes public transportation and provides a variety of housing types to meet the needs of all income levels in each community.

Getting political leaders to buy into a single plan may be the biggest challenge.

Ron Roberts, a Temecula councilman and SCAG president, said he hopes that cities, counties and planning agencies will adjust their transportation projects and land-use zoning to mirror the long-range plan.

"It's going to take cooperation from a lot of people to make it work," he said.

SCAG planning consultant John Fregonese said the key is to put the heaviest development in just 2 percent of the region's land. That portion would be developed into population clusters with retail and housing centers and built near key freeway corridors.

Priced out of Orange and San Diego counties, more people are gravitating toward the Inland area in search of affordable homes. The homes may be here but the jobs are lagging, which forces 1.2 million Inland residents to commute an average of 21 miles to work, according to the association.

But more jobs could be on the way if the plan takes off.

"There will come a point where the land-use cost for some (Orange County) businesses will be so expensive that it'll make sense to move where their workers live, which is in the Inland Empire," said Brea Mayor Bev Perry.

The blueprint is the result of a two-year, \$1.3 million study of population increases, housing needs and traffic projections in Riverside, San Bernardino, Orange, Los Angeles, Imperial and Ventura counties. Association members surveyed 1,300 residents and met with experts from each county and leaders from 187 cities.

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